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The politics of social justice in neoliberal times

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We thank Tom Slater for his comments, acknowledging that much of his paper is in significant disagreement with our own. We are agreed that we are engaged in contestations over meaning, and united on the principle of social justice as a guiding force for critical geographers, but we differ over how we might contribute to its realisation. This debate over tactics reflects quite different conceptualisations of power, resistance, and what it is to be political as academics. We respect Slater's "no", but question whether this mode of resistance is enough. Does it constitute a politics of *disobedience*? Are the politics of engagement and alliance between academics, community and social movements too messy and inevitably contradictory, as he implies, for us to adopt alternative practices of research and teaching in geography beyond the academy?

Among the interesting points that Slater makes, there are some errors in the portrayal of our argument that we wish to address. In particular, his inaccurate representation of the wider field of participatory geographies as largely engaged in collaborations with the state rather than grassroots organisations; and his suggestion that participatory geographies fit neatly with the impact agenda, rather than embodying an alternative. Our key focus remains the central question of what it is to be political as academics.

What, and where, are participatory geographies?

We want to be clear: we do not believe that participatory geographers' 'time has come' with the impact agenda (Slater p2). Rather, we argue for the potential of more participatory praxis to undermine neoliberal structures within the academy precisely through subverting notions of 'impact' towards a social justice agenda. We highlighted clear disparities between the objectives and alliances of scholars associated with the growing field of participatory geographies, and the Research Excellence Framework's (REF) reproduction of elitism in the measurement of impact, particularly through the problematic scaling and construction of what constitutes 'impactful' research. As Williams (forthcoming) suggests, the emphasis on metrics and output matrices unhelpfully disconnects the public diffusion of research (media interviews, newspaper articles, website hits) from the experience of collaboration and

dissemination through workshops and discussion with participants in ongoing, informal relationships.

Participatory geographies shouldn't be conflated with policy research, ESRC's user involvement statements or the impact agenda. We support Slater's critique of the type of policy research that bolsters both the neoliberal status quo and social injustice. But participation as deployed by the state itself is not the same as that enacted with radical grassroots alternatives. Participatory geographies have socialist, feminist and postcolonialist roots, its earliest protagonists involved in action that was clearly community-based (for example Breitbart 1995; Bunge 1971; Townsend et al 1991). A contemporary and rapidly expanding literature also identifies that participatory geographers most often forge alliance with groups, organisations and movements who are contesting state policies and practices (see Askins 2009; Cahill et al 2008; Cameron and Gibson 2005; Mason forthcoming; mrs c kinpaisby-hill 2011). That's not to say it is incompatible, or impossible, to conduct critical participatory geographies with policy-makers, but such research utilises 'a paradigm far removed from one of policy-oriented research where 'answers' are given to policy questions posed by the state' (McGuirk and O'Neill, forthcoming). We reiterate here our arguments about the lack of fit and shared intent between participatory geographies and the impact agenda.

We should also beware slippage between 'participatory' and 'public' geographies. While some synergies exist, there can be significant differences in philosophies and practices across a wide continuum of engagement. We call for careful attention between initiatives deployed to shore up existing academic and institutional privilege, and activities that work to destabilise it (see Fuller and Askins 2010). Slater is right that the ESRC deploys the language of 'participation', 'empowerment' 'capacity building', as do major institutions of governance and finance and multi-national corporations; this does not mean they own it, nor does it necessitate rejecting the concept of participation itself. Rather it points to the important political role academics can play in challenging such institutions on their deployment of participation, its meaning, practices and effects (Askins forthcoming; Hickey and Mohan 2004).

Who asks research questions?

Central to our understanding of participatory geographies is the disruption of knowledge hierarchies. This makes problematic Slater's assertion that 'for reasons of intellectual

autonomy it is troubling to allow external collaborators [...] to be involved in setting questions' (p4). The isolation of this 'intellectual autonomy' seems far more 'mysterious' than the identity of the users and participants involved in participatory geographies (p4), who are decidedly real (for example see Cahill et al 2008; Hume-Cook et al 2007). Drawing on feminist thought that positions all academic knowledge as situated, participatory approaches have demonstrated the liberatory potential of the co-production of knowledge, and the transformative effects on theory of 'having our ideas critiqued by social movements live and direct' (Mason, in High forthcoming). Participatory approaches can't circumvent the paradoxes of power in research and representation (see Kesby 2007), but through closer integration of theory and practice, they extend the processes of theorising and knowing beyond campus spaces, explicitly recognising intellectual labour as a thoroughly social, rather than individual and autonomous, activity (mrs c. kinpaisby-hill 2011).

What politics for social justice?

We agree with Gregson et al's (2011) observation that the impact agenda may be both evidence of and an opportunity to challenge the neoliberalisation of higher education. Our critique of opposition to the impact agenda was a call to reflect on the degree to which the defence of 'blue skies' and 'autonomous' research is a defence of a particular expression of those values shaped by previous Research Assessment Exercises (RAE). Our intervention sought to re-produce audit in ways that support the agendas both we and Slater value, and to do this before the meaning of 'impact' solidifies and produces entirely neoliberal effects. Slater is right that there are dangers in a strategic, more positive engagement. Such tactics entail tensions and discomforts, leave us exposed, and their politics are unfinished and require continuous working through. We recognise that such resistance, through reworking meaning, runs the paradoxical risk of (re)circulating discourses that retain the potential to effect neoliberal agendas - even if we are successful in making them do other work as well. But a politics of refusal/non-engagement is precarious in ceding control over the meaning of key discourses to those who don't share a radical vision for the academy.

This is a hopeful but not naïve politics. Subverting academic governance is also about disrupting and revealing it as constructed and transmutable through engagement. In this vein, participatory geographers continue alternative traditions, such as collective naming as a response to academic individualism (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; mrs kinpaisby 2008) and pursuing direct action as means to research praxis (Mason forthcoming; Routledge 2011). Such examples, small and large, practice alternatives to saying "no".

Slater argues for having an impact and being political through teaching. We agree wholeheartedly. In answer to his question 'might we find innovative ways to get our students to 'participate' too, with a view to contesting the institutional arrangements governing higher education?' (p6), we point to participatory pedagogies: to undergraduate modules where geography students collaborate in research with local activists and community organisations (Kindon and Elwood 2009, Mountz et al 2008; Pain et al forthcoming); to academic geographers' support of student protests in the UK (Hopkins et al 2011); to the burgeoning number of PhDs working with communities and grassroots organisations (come to any RGS/IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group event); and to attempts to engage school children to think critically about geography, drawing on their own knowledges of place (see <http://thegeographycollective.wordpress.com>). Participation in social justice movements can be integrated into all aspects of academic activities (see Leeds University's Masters programme in Activism and Social Change): teaching a politics of social justice in the classroom is just part of this. We agree that the separation between research and teaching engendered by RAE/REF reflects the logic of accountancy rather than the experience of academic practice, and this is precisely why we argue for a much broader conceptualisation of 'impact' that holds the potential for recognising that learning and teaching activities are interconnected with research.

We are all impacted

We share Slater's hostility to the RAE/REF: we discussed 'the institutional arrangements damaging British higher education' (Slater p2) in the opening pages of our paper, and have contributed to this critique for some time (for example, Askins 2008; mrs kinpaisby 2008; Pain and Bailey 2004). But the struggle in which we are all enmeshed is not as simple as Slater implies. Governments, technocrats and elite intellectuals do not simply hold power over 'impacted' academics: relations of power and resistance are rather more entangled (Sharp et al 2000). To suggest otherwise not only absolves academics from implication in reproducing the audit oriented academy, but also confers a coherence and stability to its circuits of power that is neither deserved nor helpful 'scientifically [or] politically' (cf Slater p.2). Many of those who really resist audit no longer hold academic posts, or find they are marginalised and immobile in current positions. Passionate opposition to the impact agenda amongst many academics has never been matched by opposition to the more significant disciplining push from RAE/REF to publish a particular form of scholarship, or to collect personal 'esteem indicators'. These latter activities have become a naturalised part of our work as

academics, and are far less often resisted. When undertaken in isolation from broader participatory and/or public engagements, the relationship of these activities to an expressed belief in furthering social justice can be hard to fathom.

From this perspective, Slater's defence of 'intellectual autonomy' seems in danger of entrenching academics as privileged research technocrats. We should be wary that in critiquing audit we are not protecting our own privileges within the power/knowledge hierarchies that have given rise to the current form of the RAE/REF in the first place.

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